

To the Dissertation and Beyond: Independent Study in the New Undergraduate Curriculum

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Introduction

Over the past 30 years social changes have taken place which makes the dialogue of teachers with students as the essential preserve of the higher educational community difficult. This is not only the case for the new universities that have made the most efforts to widen participation. With the decline of industry and the expansion of services, a reformation of social class has re-designated many jobs in what has become the 'working-middle' of society as professional occupations requiring higher qualifications. Partly in response to this pressure for certification, many young people are leaving school and college later with supposedly higher standards but often trained rather than educated, or "over schooled but undereducated" (A. Ainley, and Allen 2010). Training to meet externally verified competences is also extending into higher education. Paradoxically, considering the hopes invested in it, new information and communications technology has not necessarily helped. While ICT allows access to a mass of information, it has also facilitated a culture of plagiarism and undermined existing expertise by multiplying the possibly verifiable criteria for new knowledge. On top of all this, academics have also often not helped themselves by designing courses which make a virtue of student choice from a range of options that may even deny the possibility of students constructing coherent conceptual totalities related to their fields of study.

This article suggests that a way to recover the conversation that should constitute induction into subject disciplines or areas of practice in higher education is through a redesign of programmes so that they focus on and culminate in the final year undergraduate dissertation. A precedent for the contributions that original acts of artistic creation, scientific experiment, technical practice, scholarship, or social research which dissertations can make to and beyond their respective disciplines or cross-disciplines is suggested in programmes of independent study.

Induction to academe

For students for whom, as Gerald Graff remarks, "the very words 'education' and 'academic' are opaque" (2003: 274) present induction is ineffective. They fail to absorb the typically 'mixed messages' that tell students simultaneously to 'be yourself – but do it the way we do it'; 'there are no right answers – but some answers are better than others'; 'debate is open and ongoing – but you have to be an expert to enter the debate'; 'we want to hear your ideas not what others have said – but unless you refer to those authorities your views won't be taken seriously'; 'challenge authority

– but you can't challenge authority unless you know the rules of the game'. As Graff concludes, "The further students are from mainstream literacy, the more likely it is that these paradoxes will come across as flat contradictions!" (30).

So, many students do not see the point of argument from different perspectives, nor do they understand how to distinguish between them with reference to evidence or reason. They have not heard Clint Eastwood's dismissal of opinions resembling a piece of anatomy common to men and women, "Everyone's got one!" Often they lack the confidence to make warranted assertions and fall back upon faith in conspiracies or their own personal 'feelings' and prejudices. Thus, like our former Prime Minister Blair, they can only say 'I know what I believe', instead of, like the philosopher of science, Michael Polanyi (1956), believing in what they know. Academics pander to such limitations by drawing upon students' experiences for validity, contributing to 'the autobiographical turn' in student writing (Chamberlayne et al. 2000). I have experimented with this myself but come to find it wanting in teaching sociology at Greenwich (Ainley 2008). Too much group work confirms these tendencies and reinforces student timidity at publicly addressing audiences they do not know, at worst leading to 'the blind leading the blind'. As Graff says, "Let's not break up into small groups!" (179).

However, it is hard for academics in the humanities and social sciences to present courses that are relevant to student concerns because their modularised offerings are usually disconnected from one another. They rarely cohere as cumulative programmes of study but make a virtue of choice between the very different styles and perspectives presented by their lecturers. Students then attempt to work these out for each lecturer on each course. 'Carousel' courses spreading through the humanities and social sciences may be delivered on a repetitive treadmill by experts in their area, like accountancy, marketing, economics etc., in business studies but they do not necessarily cohere into a body of knowledge in its own right. At least business has a vocational relevance but in the USA the English curriculum has "bloated until it includes soap operas, Looney Tunes, muscle magazines, bubble-gum cards and graffiti", as Frederick Crews (2006) has the fictional N. Mack Hobbs proudly declaring. Yet in U.S. universities, there is – as in Scotland – a first year foundation. Often, these are often given over to 'teaching the conflicts courses' of the type that Crews satirises. However, they also attempt some intellectual socialisation into the on-going conversation of academic culture, unlike our own inductions which largely restrict themselves to study skills, time-management and tours of the library/IT facilities.

The crisis of student (academic) literacy is combined with one of legitimacy as the widened student body desperately hopes their expensively purchased degrees will gain them more than 'a Sainsbury's job' on graduation. This is forcing academics to agree what is important in the subjects they teach as they seek to enable new generations of students to adapt tertiary level learning in the way comprehensive school teachers previously struggled to open secondary schooling to the mass of the population. That this is happening first in 'The Bad Universities' – as defined negatively by The Times Good University Guide – contributes to the denigration of such efforts, seen by the Old Guard as abandoning 'academic standards'.

Moreover, it is in these institutions that the pressure is on to reduce traditional programmes towards two-year degrees, either as foundation 'degrees' or as three-year courses delivered over two years to include the summer in order to utilise plant and staff more efficiently. Or merely as preliminary

to postgraduate study when 'real higher educations' can begin. These are also the institutions where most students live locally and are in part-time if not full-time employment, as well as having the greatest needs and disabilities such as dyslexia. Raised and differentiated fees will emphasise instead of concealing these differences. To overcome them, there should be an emphasis upon the contribution to knowledge that students can make in their chosen academic disciplines or fields of practice through independent research, scholarship, creation or application in the form of their final year dissertation.

The dissertation in the undergraduate experience

In many programmes of study a large part of the final degree mark is already constituted by the final year dissertation, inquiry project, investigation or 'end of degree show' in art and related subjects. The coherence that this original contribution imposes upon their programme of study as a whole should be made clear to students at induction and the first and second years of their programme should build towards it. Thus students will be progressively introduced to the debates – if not 'conflicts' – that are integral to the on-going constitution of their chosen subject or area of application preparatory to making a contribution to it. They will also be introduced to the canon of texts and experiments as exemplars presenting the conceptual tools with which to order the field's information base. They can then recognise that the truth claims they make in the wider world of public debate and professional practice accord with the accepted criteria of scientific and logical proof and so go beyond personal admissions of opinions, beliefs or prejudices.

Above all, educational community should be preserved in the Humboldtian dialogue of teachers with students and this is where research and investigation, scholarship and experiment should find their place. As then Minister for Higher Education, Bill Rammell, argued in a speech at the University of Warwick in October 2006, "An understanding of the research process (asking the right questions in the right way: conducting experiments; and collating and evaluating information) must be a key part of any undergraduate curriculum." The importance of correct spelling and grammar, punctuation and paragraphing in academic and other writing can also be stressed, along with some familiarity with statistics and including the reasons for correct citation (rather than the confused fetish different instructions often make of the Harvard referencing system).

There is a precedent in English higher education for this culmination to undergraduate degrees in the form of independent study as it was practised until recently across the river at the University of East London. The School for Independent Study was founded at what was then the Polytechnic of East London in 1974. It began as a way of getting local people as teachers into local schools, offering initially a two-year diploma in higher education but later expanding to degree and then postgraduate level courses without any particular subject specialisation. In 1991 however, the School was closed due to a combination of circumstances and independent study was devolved to the other six Schools of the soon to be re-designated university. So ended a radical higher education experiment that closed a period of pedagogic experimentation in child-centred primary, comprehensive secondary and expanded further and higher education in the 1960s and '70s, that included the founding of the polytechnics themselves.

Independent study emphasised, through the part that students played in devising their own courses of study and in deciding how they would be assessed, a recognition of the need for students' active participation in the construction of their own social institutions and environments. There

was therefore an essential democratic component to the work of the School. This was, moreover, not a final end state to be reached by students but a developing capacity which was acquired as it was exercised. Education was thus recognised as an active process of self-directed enquiry in an essentially open-ended and dialogic process that was inherently unpredictable so that its results could not be anticipated by either teachers or taught.

In principal, independent study is not restricted to higher education but could be incorporated into the learning programmes of all students beginning as early as possible by building upon the project work still sometimes undertaken in primary schools. Instead of 'cramming' for tests that select a minority for entry to the next stage, the methods of learning and assessment originally associated with GCSE course work before it was constricted by the National Curriculum could be raised and made continuous from school through to further and higher education. In a complementary motion, the independent scholarship, research and creation of postgraduate learning should be brought down and integrated into all undergraduate dissertations. Thus at all levels of learning individual programmes will include some element of independent study in the sense of original discovery, creation or research with forms of assessment and self-assessment based upon students' work and negotiated with them. At what used to be 'final degree' level, this can be embodied in the final year dissertation or investigation, demonstration or show. This may have more or less vocational relevance to the occupations to which students aspire after graduation.

During its lifespan from 1974–91 the SIS at the PEL steered a variable course between the twin poles of academicism and vocationalism (see Robbins 1988 for a full history). Initially it set out to broaden progressive ideals for the polytechnics, identified as The People's Universities by Robinson in 1968 to replace the concept of the middle-class boarding school university with that of the working-class urban university. In place of the traditional university alliance between liberal and academic education, the polytechnic ideal allied liberal humanism with vocational service to its students and the communities from which they came. There was therefore a notion of really useful knowledge which opposed the academic cultivation of knowledge supposedly for its own sake.

Independent study required its students to identify an original and practical interest which was personal to them and could be used as a vehicle for developing general level knowledge and higher cognitive skill up to and beyond their vocational application. Skill and knowledge can also be developed in final year dissertations to make scientific research, scholarship and artistic creation an integral part of the independent study of all students, rather than separating teaching from research. This in essence is the answer to the vexed question of research in higher education: research must be generalised to as many teachers and students as possible. This does not preclude dedicated specialist research institutes such as already exist in this and other countries. In general however, teaching should be combined with research as a means of introducing students to an academic community that critically learns from the past to change behaviour in the future. The undergraduate dissertation can be developed to emphasize the contribution that students can make to that continuing conversation as the final degree demonstration of graduates.

Post-script

Of course, such a rethinking of undergraduate provision is unnecessary if you share the view that announced and anticipated cuts to further and higher education mean that universities will soon be able to pull up their drawbridges of traditional standards and return to 'business as usual'. They will abandon widening participation as students and parents also become increasingly disillusioned with it as part of the 'credibility crunch' education as a whole faces in recession. However, this would be to abandon also future generations so that they really are 'lost'. It won't happen – if only because, despite promised 'economic recovery', there really is nothing else for them to do!

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